Hoskins re-energises Aberdeen Art Gallery
A place to stay: Groningen’s enviable Forum
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There are no new ideas, we are sometimes told, just old ideas revisited. And that is good: architecture evolves gently and is replete with references. Mies designed glass walls that drop into the ground for his 1930 Tugendhat House in Brno; that idea was sporadically imitated over the years and now reappears – in curved glass – in Nenad King’s road café pavilion. It is an eaterie that bears about as much resemblance to your standard caff as the Tugendhat House did to its domestic Czech rivals 90 years ago.

Grimshaw’s early big-shed architecture is an idea that was designed from the start to be revisited. Though he cannot have imagined in 1976 that his Herman Miller Action Factory in Bath would become a university art school, its spaces have lent themselves perfectly to this – and for once the same architects were invited back to remake a classic.

Art galleries are buildings that are never complete, forever being revisited and extended. Sometimes it is necessary to take a step back, see through the eyes of the original architects and restore the clarity. So it is with Aberdeen’s Art Gallery where Hoskins has contributed a new attic storey that respects and frees up the original phases from Victorian times to the 1920s.

And so to the Netherlands, where the idea of the Fun Palace has reappeared in lovely Groningen. It is a wonder contained in a chiselled new megastructure in a man-made earthquake zone. Respect to young architects NL and their clients. Never waste a good idea. •
Pretty vacant
Nex’s King’s Road café pavilion seeps invisibly into its surroundings, making private space public

Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Photographs: James Brittain

The strapline on the website of Alan Dempsey’s design studio Nex runs ‘Connecting People and Places’ – a bit like Nokia before they faded from prominence. You hope that in this case, Nex’s approach will have a little more longevity. That sure seems to be the intention of the former AA unit tutor, as he explains over coffee in his just completed café pavilion at Duke of York’s Square, a stone’s throw from Sloane Square via the gestural flourish of Peter Jones. Our conversation has broadly been about the privatization of public space – but Dempsey’s interpretation is more nuanced than mine. Public space bylaws abound, he says; for him the bigger question concerns the terms under which you can use it and how private space can embody a civic, public component.

He answered the question at Royal Wharf Pier in London’s Docklands by creating a public river walk on the way to his riverboat pontoon for Ballymore – a jetty projecting 130m into the Thames with the surprise of a glazed balustrade around a triangular pier that allows the public to get up close and personal with the rise and fall of the river. In a different but no less surprising way, there’s a rise and fall at Duke of York Square; one that subtly blurs the usually rigidly applied boundary between public and private.

Nex’s Duke of York Square restaurant pavilion sits in architect PDP’s 2005 Cadogan Estate development. It reconciles the problematic geometries exposed in plan when the formerly walled-off, grade I-listed, 18th century drill-hall for the children of army widows was opened out to the King’s Road – before being enlisted as the new Saatchi Gallery. Dempsey says its curiously capped-off gated curved wall, in the form of an opening paper clip, inspired Nex’s circular intervention: a building with no front or back; a curved, arched, precast Dolomite quartz concrete form that picks up on the wall’s language and then decides to run counter to it. Less obvious in the firm’s 2012 competition entry for the pavilion was its wrestling with the notion of public space and how to intervene in the private square without losing...
Perspective section

The steel gate is closed, offering people a 4m-high eyrie, letting them escape the unseemly King's Road congestion and lose themselves in the green canopy of plane trees on the former parade ground to the south. Run through with herbs and perennials, the experience, designed by landscaper Bradley-Hole Schoenich, is intended to be as pungently sensory as it is visual.

Internally, despite the drum form and hard surfaces setting up the potential for a perfect storm of cacophony, sending the kitchen below stairs has in the main dispensed with fad for open plan and the clatter of pans, in favour of more dignified acoustics. The well-detailed and attenuated ash slat ceiling radiating from the restaurant's any more of it to a stipulated 40-cover restaurant. Solving that produced a trinity of responses: to sink service areas of kitchen, store and loos into the basement below the restaurant; to generate an externally accessed roof garden on top; and, most dramatically of all, to make use of the glazed circumference able to sink into the ground, removing the boundary between pavilion and square. All three have been consummately executed, pandering to the discretion of the client while suggesting the tantalising possibility, like Granary Square at King's Cross, of private space that seems to have become public by default.

A staircase of timber ash on the 'rear' of the pavilion is revealed as a hidden route to the roof garden, that, until its low stainless sparkling quartz concrete core soaks up the chatter of the 'Made in Chelsea' set to create instead a soft but lively acoustic reminiscent of Vienna's gentrified cinnamon-scented cafés.

But, of course, the pièce de résistance is the three 10m curved, laminated, toughened glass walls that, on activating, sink silently into the ground, removing the boundary between pavilion and square. All three have been consummately executed, pandering to the discretion of the client while suggesting the tantalising possibility, like Granary Square at King's Cross, of private space that seems to have become public by default. A staircase of timber ash on the ‘rear’ of the pavilion is revealed as a hidden route to the roof garden, that, until its low stainless sparkling quartz concrete core soaks up the chatter of the ‘Made in Chelsea’ set to create instead a soft but lively acoustic reminiscent of Vienna’s gentrified cinnamon-scented cafés. But, of course, the pièce de résistance is the three 10m curved, laminated, toughened glass walls that, on activating, sink silently into the ground to marry the interior’s zingy black terrazzo floors with the square’s staid yorkstone sets. Developed with Swiss firm HIRT, which had only ever done a straight configuration, they overcame the panels’ change in centre of gravity, glazing stresses and strains to produce sealed units whose performance helped the building achieve a BREEAM Excellent rating. Eschewing hydraulic and robotic solutions, Nex chose a low-tech motorised one, setting panels on a curved frame, counterbalanced by a steel universal beam, all sunk into a concrete perimeter pit. It can even be raised and lowered by hand.

More than just a gimmick, the huge dropped glass sash makes the 40 covers in the limited space a viable proposition. And, Dempsey thinks, it means the pavilion can interact with the seasons in our temporal clime; for most of the year it need be neither fully open nor fully closed, but any number of states in between. An analogue-kind-of-space in the digital age; one that’s ripe for stealth appropriation – hell, occupation – by the square’s four million annual visitors. And all on the King’s road too. How punk is that? •

Left: With the glass walls fully retracted into the floor, the pavilion meets the square.
Above: On the roof garden, visitors can enjoy the view into the canopy of trees.
Accompanying his partner to Genoa for her five-week crash course in Italian, Craig Auckland came, at some point, to take this photograph. In the Italian fashion, the star is a car less parked than parachuted in; but that is as it should be. Auckland was inspired by Italian architect turned photographer Gabriele Basilico, the self-styled ‘measurer of space’, whose epic studies documented whole cities, not least a war-torn Beirut in 1991. With his free time, Auckland roamed the streets of Columbus’ birthplace with his camera to get under the skin of a city himself. Among the many thousands of shots he took of the bustling mercantile port, this back-street one he chose to represent it is, at first sight, strangely low key.

But consider the depth of field garnered from the long exposure; twilight on a crisp January night illuminating the walls in a cool blue pallor, the streetlights further accentuating them in almost hyperreal clarity. The damask rose of the small house’s walls is satisfyingly counterpointed by the dark leaf-green shutters, with the plastic canopy over the entrance matching them in colour if not in domestic feel; bizarrely skewing the language of the home to that of a nightclub or bordello.

The city’s urban grain is intimated in the grander if equally shabby apartments at the back; and its topography, rising steeply out of the sea, in the hairpin bend that marks the home’s boundary. In the layers gradually drawn from the image, there is ultimately a cultural one too. Beyond the rough, brick-stepped pavement and beneath a ‘No Parking’ note that seems less a prohibition than an open challenge, is the impossibility, to Saxon eyes, of that car tucked behind the traffic sign. Bravo!
Nicholas Grimshaw completed the Action Factory in 1977 for furniture company Herman Miller, pioneers in furniture and open plan offices. Tucked into the light industrial detritus that follows the River Avon out of Bath, this project has always been notable for its scale and clarity, its smooth, curved grp cladding panels marking it out. The panels hover unhappily between beige and taupe, related to the Bath stone that was its original justification but – paired with the darkened glass – dating it firmly in the 70s alongside a generation of now-scrapped bathroom suites.

Grimshaw Architects was asked to convert it for Bath Spa University and if it seems an unlikely setting for a 21st century arts school, when you get inside it makes perfect sense. The original yellow high tech steel structure draws together the energy and industry of studios, print workshops and kilns, Grimshaw’s conversion of Bath’s Action Factory into an art campus is even more energetic, industrious and poetic than ever.

Words: Eleanor Young Photographs: Paul Raftery

Artists in residence

In Numbers

£23m construction cost
8,500m² GFA
2013 grade II listed
750 current student numbers
324 existing facade GRP panels
46 of which are replaced
160 glass panels

Left From in among the original high tech structure you can look into the fine arts studio and collaborations in the street.

Right During the building’s factory life the indented glazed facades were closed in. Now they are open again, this is a continuation of the street opening to the river.
a sociable street and informal lecture theatre of giant steps. Everything seems possible in a big shed such as this and paint on the roughly reconditioned concrete floor shows how production lines used the building in a similar way. A rather plain corporate glass box has been stuck on top — a disappointment rather than denuement. But it performs another function, freeing up space from banal offices below and giving staff a quiet hideaway.

The name Action Factory has not survived the change. Drawn from Herman Miller’s concept of an Action Office and applied to a factory, it was quashed by concerns about its seriousness (‘a bit Playschool’) and a wish to distance the university from ideas of higher education just churning out graduates. Of the 324 original GRP panels only 46 had to be replaced. Others were patched and reconditioned. As Grimshaw reversed ad hoc interventions with grace. ‘This became the project mantra — ambition and emphasise change. Panels were made to be swapped with glass and the factory did make changes. But when Grimshaw’s Ben Heath started to examine the building the university had bought it didn’t quite fit with the line in the brief: ‘Changes with grace.’ This became the project mantra as Grimshaw reversed ad hoc interventions that had corralled workers into dark office boxes away from the noisy machinery. In its new incarnation the boxes are for machines, boxes away from the noisy machinery. In its new incarnation the boxes are for machines, in the dark heart of the plan, and humans take back ownership of the ‘super room’ as Grimshaw called it. An almost imperceptible change is the raising of the roof to ensure the structure could take the extra loading of the rooftop extension, Okalux rooflights and PV panels. New veriendeel steel trusses sit above the yellow ‘heritage structure’ and above them is a CLT roof deck. Now the historic steel calls up for some sort of parkour action where services used to be slung, although areas around are planned to ensure it is not easily climbed.

The Action Factory was listed grade II in 2013 shortly before Herman Miller moved out to its own consolidated campus, also by Grimshaw, in nearby Chippenham. A major part of the listing is the ‘poetic’ brief, which is reproduced in full. The short lines suggest ambition and emphasise change. Panels were made to be swapped with glass and the factory did make changes. But when Grimshaw’s Ben Heath started to examine the building the university had bought it didn’t quite fit with the line in the brief: ‘Changes with grace.’ This became the project mantra as Grimshaw reversed ad hoc interventions that had corralled workers into dark office boxes away from the noisy machinery. In its new incarnation the boxes are for machines, boxes away from the noisy machinery. In its new incarnation the boxes are for machines, in the dark heart of the plan, and humans take back ownership of the ‘super room’ as Grimshaw called it. An almost imperceptible change is the raising of the roof to ensure the structure could take the extra loading of the rooftop extension, Okalux rooflights and PV panels. New veriendeel steel trusses sit above the yellow ‘heritage structure’ and above them is a CLT roof deck. Now the historic steel calls up for some sort of parkour action where services used to be slung, although areas around are planned to ensure it is not easily climbed.

The great moment of the building is at the head of the main first floor stairs, in among the structure and looking over, and into, both the ‘street’ and fine art studios. The activity is separated by a single storey ply wall but from above all is visible. This how most of the planning works; many spaces have open edges or routes through them. The lecture space is a prime example, a cascade of steps with bean bags and cushions scattered around, enclosed at ground floor level but open to the first floor. Silent disco technology will allow listeners to hear the speaker without interrupting other activities but until then lecturers have reported quite a different, welcome, pattern of interaction with the audience in this space who seem to feel more part of a discussion.

For the head of school of craft Dan Allen and head of school of design Kerry Curtis the building suggests all sorts of exciting possibilities for comment and interaction as work is ‘seen and exposed’. Having seen artists’ work, graphic students are dabbling in, some just in glass, as in the printing and lithography workshops. Students of all disciplines are able to experiment and assemble works together.
required – allow students of all disciplines to experiment and assemble works together. Allen revels in the fit between architect and learning in the handmade and high tech of the building. And it has given parity to courses which were stuck out on a limb and brought staff and students together, boosting morale and sense of community. Allen and Curtis are enjoying seeing practices change and how that will influence teaching. There are 750 students and the building was briefed for modest growth of up to 820, which the heads say they won't exceed.

Internally the original materials are joined by plenty of ply (used with insulation as an internal backing to the refurbished GRP cladding) and some glass. Black waxed mild steel balustrades fit the factory style – better than the fabric and timber batten wall coverings, which feel like a standard higher education answer to softening acoustics. But these are small niggles. Inside, the layout makes the energy of the school palpable. It fits another important part of Herman Miller's brief – that the building should have 'flexibility and be non-precious and non-monumental'. The care of reworking and the students themselves ensure that Locksbrook Campus brings life to this neglected corner of the city. The low rise life of the place is particularly important as Bath’s main development sites are along the river and recent buildings have been clumsy and oversized. This looks set to continue, from the redevelopment of the po-mo Homebase to a huge new rugby stadium, again by Grimshaw, alongside Robert Adam’s Pulteney Bridge in the city centre. In a city where hills, views and nature are as important as the Georganian architecture of the street it is encouraging to see this unmonumental building overtaken by the billowing willows planted when the Action Factory was completed.

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Designed and built in Oxfordshire
Granite. There’s no avoiding it – attempts to discuss Aberdeen or its buildings without reference to the hard grey stone and its use in the city are seemingly hopeless; the uniformity, the blankness, the austerity of detail enlivened by sparkle... the clichés that begin any article on the city seem to be inevitable regardless of subject. Dodging mention of it becomes most futile of all in relation to Aberdeen Art Gallery, which was originally financed and supplied by granite magnate Alexander MacDonald and designed by that master of the material, Alexander Marshall Mackenzie. The gallery exterior of 1885 revels in the imperviousness of the material, its clarity and most of all its flatness. But much less remarked upon in the physical make up of this city are the copper roofs on many of its larger buildings. For all its proximity to the highlands, Aberdeen has fewer hills than the other east coast cities of Edinburgh and Dundee – with so few elevated public views the ‘copperness’ of rooftop civic Aberdeen tends to go unnoticed. But with Hoskins Architects’ recent redevelopment of the gallery, this may start to change.

Built directly on top of the gallery’s granite wall head, the new rooftop extension is the most visible part of an extensive programme of repair and reorganisation to the Category A Listed building. A combination of naturally oxidising copper scallops, jointed by glittering red-orange stainless steel strips, forms a sheer wall to the rooftop boundary with Robert Gordon’s College to the east before darting in and out along the principal Schoolhill elevation to the south. It continues to the west where it genuflects away from the (copper) dome on the Remembrance Hall.

**Tough love**

Hoskins’ remodelling of Aberdeen Art Gallery offers a visual feast, improving the displays, views of the city and the building’s contribution to the streetscape.

Words: Ben Addy  Photographs: Dapple Photography

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**GALLERY**

**IN NUMBERS**

- £346m construction cost
- 7741m² gifa
- 1883 winning design for original gallery
- 1905 Sculpture court added
- 1925 Remembrance Hall and Cowdray Hall added
- 2009 Hoskins win competition for remodelling

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*Left* Granite entrance facade with new angled copper-clad rooftop extension.

*B Above* Main facade from near memorialised street ‘darting’ rooftop.
The extension has an austere allure – while the vogueish fluting of the surface is shared with some other arts buildings of the last few decades, its effect on the street is very satisfying. And the darting plan always reverts to the corner points of the original building – to underline rather than contradict the composition of what is otherwise an accumulation of buildings – while taking its place among the copper domes and spires of its neighbours. Most window and ventilation apertures are set back so as not to interrupt the rhythm of vertical strips. As oblique views along Schoolhill are both the most important and most commonly experienced, the depth of relief in the surface of the extension complements the granite facade below; not so much so as to detract, but equally not too flat. Its appearance against the northern sky, certainly with the low sun at this time of year, brings its own delight, complementing the flecks of mica in the ashlar walls.

Apart from the new extension, the gallery exterior has barely been touched, such is the tendency to cleanliness and the durability of the masonry. By contrast, the architect has reconfigured the interior plan in sometimes subtle, sometimes radical fashion. Welcome as the understated glamour of the new addition is, it is in the organisational configuration of the gallery that the architect has really done Aberdonians a service. Reflecting the priorities of the original benefactors of the gallery when it was established in 1873, the collection of the Aberdeen Art Gallery has focussed predominantly on work by living artists over the course of nearly a century and a half, so the building has a fascinatingly eclectic but nevertheless internationally significant collection of work. Despite this, growing up on nearby Denside in the 1980s I can only recall with clarity the collection of Joseph Farquharson paintings from that same rural hinterland; soft focus sheep in the snow – frozen mutton. Visits to the gallery were marked by an underwhelming experience of the building and a wholly inaccurate impression that the collection was modest – it’s range and depth were never fully apparent. Hoskins’ refurbishment has performed a significant corrective. I wonder how many others will have the same experience.

The impact of the reorganisation is clear the moment you enter the building: the formerly unprepossessing reception and its thoroughly unpromising café have been cleared away to form a simple and legible entrance area; light, cleanly detailed and appropriately scaled to the function of a gallery.
in this compact city, and with clear connections to the interior. Passing through newly exposed columns into the enclosed sculpture court, the first consequences of the rooftop extension are immediately apparent – an abundance of natural light and an enjoyable dialogue between the granite and plaster neo-classicism and the simple glass balustraded hoop where the new gallery starts on the second floor. The relative drama of the aperture above you might overwhelm the modestly scaled space were it not for the simplicity of the geometry and the extended visual field through to adjacent galleries. The building opens up laterally in this space, making the additional volume above feel airy. There is also much visual enjoyment to be had from the polychromatic columns to the peristyle – a witty 1:1 sample pack from the original granite supplier patron of the gallery. Circulation, both new and reinstated, to the original Marshall Mackenzie plan is immediately comprehensible from the sculpture court. Here the axis of the original plan has been developed to create connections between the original building and two subsequent extensions to the west – the Remembrance Hall and Cowdray Hall – as well as with the new rooftop gallery. These connections are all framed by a dark grey timber portal – a unifying motif that is replicated across the gallery, old parts and new. The most notable deployment of the grey timber portal is the large new stairway cleared through the plan at the back of the sculpture court, visible from the main entrance and reinforcing the sense of openness and legibility. West of the sculpture court the Remembrance Hall has also been brought into the functional organisation of the building and another glazed hoop provides efficient connection at the upper level. Although the spaces range over period and typology, the enjoyable jolts of difference in the building relate to space and light, not style or material.

The enjoyable jolts of difference in the building relate to space and light, not style or material. The gallery spaces themselves are appropriately restrained throughout. While the current exhibition design is often distracting (some rooms would benefit from much less ‘interpretation’) in terms of the architecture they are well configured for the display of art, especially paintings – the consequence of a productive discussion between architect and client. Interestingly, the client team was composed of the gallery’s own curatorial staff rather than external project or facilities management personnel. The architect says this led to an ‘absolutely joyous’ process and it would appear to show: this is now a building that does justice to the outstanding quality of the collection it contains.

Up on the roof, the extension provides a standalone gallery for temporary shows as well as a generous exhibition space wrapped around the void to the sculpture court below. The darting plan creates external pockets between the envelope of the new addition and the roofline of the original building – one looking down the length of Belmont Street and the other providing a valuable terrace adjacent to the dome of Remembrance Hall. These external spaces combined with controlled views from the temporary exhibition space generously expand the enjoyment of the building and provide new perspectives on the city – helping to reveal its copper pinacles, cupolas and domes.
I’d be lying if I said the architects and journalists I spoke to thought it would be worthwhile visiting Groningen’s new Forum. The rendered drawings didn’t look particularly sophisticated. The building seemed to have taken over a vital public space in the city centre. It looked oversized, cumbersome, far taller than those around for no reason.

But I know architects who live there and I knew the project was a big deal for the city and the Netherlands, with a lot of history already. In 2011 construction was halted for a year and a half to re-evaluate the structure in the face of earthquakes plaguing the area, caused by decades of drilling ‘Dutch gold’ from the gas fields 20km away. The Forum has been a long time coming amid frustrated processes and changes of heart by local authorities and residents.

The competition for a new cultural centre was

### IN NUMBERS

- €101m Forum construction cost
- 17,000m² gifa cultural centre
- 10,000m² underground parking
- €275m total regeneration cost including buildings on new square
- €70m total earthquake strengthening cost

Groningen wants more permanent residents. The Forum by NL Architects will help attract them

Words: Isabelle Priest  Main image: Deon Prins

Below left: The Forum sits in a new public square to the east of Groningen’s Grote Markt and City Hall. The street between has been brought forward and rebuilt.

Right: The new Forum sails into the city past the Martinikerk tower. It replaces a huddle of post-war building, including a multi-storey car park.
launched in 2016 and finalised in February 2007, which partially explains the quality of the drawings. But it origins date back to the millennium and aborted plans for a high-speed rail linking Amsterdam-Groningen-Hamburg, which would have halved the 127 minute journey to the Dutch capital and better connected the city to the rest of the country, isolated as it is in the less prosperous north-east. As compensation the council was awarded €35m to spend on something else.

‘The city had a good experience with the Groninger Museum,’ explains the Forum’s director Dirk Nijdam. ‘It was also a historical spot, a cosy area. But there was a period when people said we needed to move the city on. We are in a province, we are quite far from Amsterdam so when we have a flag, we should wave it a bit higher to be seen from the rest of the Netherlands. The museum became a big candy bar. It attracted people from all over the world. Everybody noticed the traffic changed and that area became really connected. The image of Groningen also improved. People had tasted what a building could do. They wanted more and to do it again.’

Completed in 1994, the museum is a colour-saturated po-mo explosion with elements by Philippe Starck, Alessandro Mendini and Coop Himmelblau linked in a tumbling fashion next to the train station. This time, however, the brief was not only to attract visitors but make people want to live in Groningen long term. Nearly one in four residents are students but few people stay longer than five years. The Forum was conceived as an all-in-one cultural centre that would provide a new home for the library and city archive and include an exhibition hall, art-house cinema, auditorium, café, restaurant and an element of local history as requested by locals during consultations. ‘You should be able to start with a coffee in the morning and end with a cocktail at night,’ says Nijdam.

The council invited many architects to participate in the project competition and shortlisted seven. Six were established firms – Zaha Hadid Architects, Foreign Office, Wiel Arets, Erick van Egeraat, UNStudio and Neutelings Riedijk (Naturalis, RIBAJ Nov) – and one young firm ‘to give it a chance’: NL Architects. ‘At this point,’ explains architect Pieter Bannenberg, ‘we had mainly only done interiors and small buildings.’ But the four juries – professional, citizens, schoolchildren and international – agreed it should win. As a practice it had grown accustomed to intensifying briefs (for example, adding a basketball court on top of a grand café for a university). But with so much in the programme already, that was not necessary. Instead, NLA’s idea was to treat all the
The interior is a kaleidoscope of images and references

separate organisations and functions as one so they could gain value by acting and working together. It grouped everything into a massive maximum-height block, ignoring the brief’s suggestion that the building should be in two parts. The sloping pyramid sides deal with the average 35m height requirement. In the original drawings it looks as though the building has been dumped on an existing square, but NL Architects’ proposal actually creates three: a new one out the front, another on the ground floor and one on the roof (on the architects’ eyes each level in the atrium is a public square tool.

Extraordinary amounts of steel were used to make the structure earthquake safe and now the building is complete, 13 years after it began, it is remarkably similar to those rendered drawings – only crisper and more exciting.

Like a great lump of greying Old Amsterdam cheese with chunks shaved off, the Forum is on a scale only comparable to a cruise liner steaming its way down the Camale della Giudecca in Venice. Cutaway angles light to the square and cause the building to lean and twist dramatically over the entrance to the 380-space underground car park and taper elegantly towards the top. Placed towards the back of the Nieuwe Markt square, the building creates narrow streets on two sides and slopes away from the square like a volcano.

‘We would always suggest a modern building,’ says Bannenberg. ‘By size it is very present, but we wanted it to fit into the city, not be white like a spaceship from somewhere else. We wanted it to blend in materially and metaphorically – the details of the City Hall and spire of the Martinikerk. The original option was sandstone, but it was decided that the dust is too unhealthy. This is tougher, the holes give it texture and it changes in the rain. We were pleased it the stone was also from quite nearby.’

Inside, the stone and apparently small windows evaporate into a bright white nine-storey atrium criss-crossed by a maze of randomly flying Harry Potter-esque escalators. The many programmes are concentrated in blocks either side of this atrium, opening out to it at the escalator landing points and occupying as many storeys as required – the cinema three, the exhibition halls two. A kiosk with free newspapers and magazines and the tourist office are on the ground floor and at the top the restaurant benefits from the views and the full breadth roof terrace. There’s a nook open-air stepped auditorium up on the tenth floor, protected from the winds, but otherwise the building is divided to stimulate chance and discovery (take the lift if you are in a hurry). The fiction library is several floors below reference books because it is more popular, and a cantilevered gaming terrace projects from the first floor by the youth library. There’s a giant net for teenagers to sprawl and bounce on, above spaces for younger children. As you move up the building, levels are split and escalators skip floors, so you can more easily see activities across the void. All the while, the views through the glazing north and south are changing your perspective of Groningen itself. The Forum is only 45m tall, but because the city is so low, you feel like you are on top of London’s Shard.

Designed with deMunnik-dejong, Steinsauner and &Prast&Hooft, the interior is a kaleidoscope of images and references, clearly conceived by a generation of architects used to having an infinity of images at their fingertips. That atrium from Meccano’s Birmingham Library. The fiction library, filled with refurbished furniture, a 1950s version of an 18th century Enlightenment gallery complete with cabinets of curiosity. The thriller section like an English gentleman’s club, including the pool table. The art-house cinema with its deep pile pink carpets, fabric walls, brown-tinted mirrors and velvet curtains recreating the 1930s glamour of going to the movies. The rousing concrete stair void and sloping angles of...
the walls and doors to the exhibition hall are a version of the subterranean entrance to the reading rooms of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Every area has a different atmosphere. The building is a cross between every latest (often Nordic) mixed cultural centre and the pop of OMA’s Casa de Música. The youth library is lined in calming wood, with a crazy double intertwining spiralling stair.

What sets the Forum apart, though, is what Nijdam changed when he took over in 2011 to get the project through the difficulties of the recession, the earthquake proofing and public despondency. He injected a burst of energy into the programme, removed the archive arguing it was ‘not a city centre activity’, downgraded the local history element and rebranded the building towards popular culture, politics and technology. He wanted video art, photography, the new world of images and for it to be a forum of information, answers and inspiration. The building is open 365 days a year, from 9am until 1am. ‘Technology often leaves people behind,’ says Nijdam. ‘We want to close the gap, help people embrace and understand it.’ The Forum is coup for the city.

Architecturally it’s exhilarating. Socially, I have no doubt people will stay to live here because of it. Perhaps the Amsterdam–Groningen journey will soon be more about commuting in the opposite direction. •

Credits

Architect
NL Architects
with ABT Engineering
Giblet
Municipality of Groningen
Delegated client
T wynstraGudde
Structural and geotechnical engineer
ABT
Interior design
NL Architects,
demunnik-deMunnik-deJong-Steinhauser,
&Prast&Hooft,
Tank, Northern Light
Technical installations
Huisman en van Muijen
Acoustics
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Why has the Arup team published the report now?

Our specialist division has been identifying and analysing trends shaping the future of the built environment for 15 years, but we felt that now is a time of real uncertainty, upheaval and transition and we wanted to open a wider dialogue that analysed different pathways to the not-too-distant future and what those might broadly constitute.

We’ve depicted four divergent futures in the report: Humans Inc, Extinction Express, Greentocracy and Post Anthropocene. These range from the collapse of society and natural systems to the two living in sustainable harmony. All four are currently as plausible as each other – the point of the report is to ask ourselves ‘What do I see emerging?’, or ‘What are the consequences of the choices I make today?’

Post Anthropocene is the most desirable. Mean temperature rise stays below 1.5°C and society, with its carbon quota, only consumes resources at a rate at which they can be replenished. Interestingly, younger members of the research team were attracted to the elements of Greentocracy, with a government that forces green regulation and heavily incentivises. The Humans Inc, ‘business as usual’ scenario is where we are currently, but I met a colleague from the Sydney office and the bush fires there have raised awareness and made that future something of great concern to its residents.

The UK Future Industrial Strategy group’s report ‘Absolute Zero’ argues that there should be no UK airports by 2050. Does engineering consultancy Arup’s report ‘2050 Scenarios: Four Plausible Futures’ go as far? We ask its author, Josef Hargrave of Arup’s Foresight, Research & Innovation Team

So what are the scenarios?

And which is it likely to be?

Would you advocate to a client to build timber towers rather than steel ones?

What’s your personal take on the research?

We are always looking independently at innovations that push the sustainable design envelope and part of that would, for instance, promote timber construction. The Post Anthropocene would strongly advocate regenerative design that restores its own sources of energy and materials, and so would we. Right now, the priorities have to be about minimising carbon impact in construction, less waste and a circular economy as well as improving and restoring the ecosystem, and planning to enhance biodiversity.

I don’t think we are quite following the Extinction Express narrative but we are struggling and we’re not on a positive path. I think we have to somehow detour via the Greentocracy to get to the Post Anthropocene. As a designer, I don’t have all the answers, but new paradigms like regenerative design are a start.
South Africa’s housing crisis puts the UK’s in the shade. Joseph Noero takes a practical approach to his mission to change that.

Eleanor Young

‘In southern African languages there is no disinterested version of beauty, things are only beautiful if they are functional,’ explains Cape Town architect, Joseph Noero. Noero thinks of his work as a riposte to the spatial and economic deprivations of South Africa’s ubiquitous shacks, and work on social housing and a cultural centre at Port Elizabeth’s Red Location, both show how purpose – beyond that of the brief – can drive every single door knob. ‘Engagement with the every day helps find out way,’ he says.

Table House is his least obviously ‘designed’ project. It took six months to design the simple columns and slab. Noero started with a conundrum he observes regularly: when shanty towns are redeveloped people are displaced either during the decant or as density is reduced (‘You can lose up to 40% of the shacks,’ he says). The only way to go was up, but the shacks weren’t strong enough. So he recalled the homes he made as a child – but its simplicity gives it huge potential reach. Table House has been prototyped as a quick build platform to put over a shack, or to the spatial and economic deprivations of South Africa’s ubiquitous shacks, and work on social housing and a cultural centre at Port Elizabeth’s Red Location, both show how purpose – beyond that of the brief – can drive every single door knob. ‘Engagement with the every day helps find out way,’ he says.

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Impassioned by the country’s desperate housing need, he has a rule in his other work never to build a house of over 150 m 2. ‘Any more is a waste of space,’ he says baldly. ‘We have lost quite a bit of work because of that.’ A recent project by the sea, that scraped in under his area limit, was made of white concrete. ‘For the cost of that I could have built 100 social housing units at the government and 100 Table Houses. There is such poverty, along- side something like that. I want us all to live in houses like that.’

The limits on what his small practice will design also cut the other way. On a 30m by 30m site in Johannesburg he was commis- sioned for housing aimed at families. Under developer pressure the design for the 12 sto- res tower first lost its cantilever to make for more accommodation, then apartments got smaller, down to 14m 2 – for units selling at the equivalent of £350, which he says is un- decent social housing if you rely on the marketplace.1

A more satisfying project has been de- signed while engaging the ‘government’s housing for those in need, which transfers ownership to the occu- pier after nine years. Three and a half million has been built and Noero’s contribution is all the way up to a 6m by 3m table house. This is illustrated with another of Noero’s amazing drawings, this time 9m by 9m, of work continues with a circular church for an ex-student of Noero’s, which will replace the Red Location. Noero Wolff Architects, as it was then, won the inaugural RIBA Lubetkin (now Interna- tional) Prize for the museum with its curva- memory boxes dividing the spaces. But sadly the cultural buildings have been closed since 2013 after protests about poor build quality on a number of houses (unrelated to Noero) and the municipality’s handling of the problem which included offering to replace the 48m 2 houses with 40m 2 ones. Noero’s Red Location housing has been awaiting housing subsidy for much of that time, and the practice revives the project every year when it is told in money available. Six months ago the drawings were resub- mitted, with a new foundation system for its clay site. ‘They are ready to go,’ says Noero. ‘There are reports that the complicated cultural- centre is scheduled to be repaired. It seems fitting that Noero’s symbolic anti-apartheid Red Location might be finally getting reborn alongside new homes that will bring a more comfortable life to some in the precinct. For Noero this is good news. ‘I am sick and tired of how it works subconsciously, he says, adding ‘though people in the office laugh at me’. The housing at Red Location is part of a wider remaking of the area that Noero has been working on for over 20 years. In this old township with its red corrugated shacks, his practice built a museum to commemo- rate apartheid, a library and art gallery, set on a crossroads, it is illustrated with another of Noero’s amazing drawings, this time 9m long, showing layer upon layer of building, of the ebb and flow of street life, the furniture and energy of occupation. Noero Wolff Architects, as it was then, won the inaugural RIBA Lubetkin (now Interna- tional) Prize for the museum with its curva-...
behind Cork House

The Stirling-shortlisted home was the result of research into a material to cut embodied carbon

Oliver Wilton and Matthew Barnett Howland

There is increasing evidence and recognition that our planet is in a biodiversity loss and climate emergency, caused predominantly by human activity. The construction and habitation of architecture makes a significant contribution to the damage that we are causing to life on our planet. The environmental impacts of any particular work of architecture can be determined and reduced by using a lifecycle approach, addressing each stage of a building’s creation, use and end of life. This approach is not often used in the UK at present, with design and regulatory efforts over the last couple of decades focusing mainly on reducing operational energy and associated gas emissions. Areas receiving far less attention include reducing embodied carbon and biodiversity impacts in construction materials, simplifying construction to reduce unmanageable complexity during building and in use, and design for disassembly to enable resource reuse. Consequently, there is a significant scope to improve the environmental performance of our architecture by a process of incremental improvements, evolving existing systems and practices with consideration of environmental performance at each stage of a building’s life. At the same time, developments in engineered plant-based materials and digital design and fabrication workflows are creating opportunities to develop radically new forms of construction. The question therefore arises as to what might be achieved by researching and developing new forms of construction using environmental sustainability first principles as the starting point.

The aim of this research was to develop a radically simple new form of plant-based construction, composed of engineered timber and pure expanded cork, made of waste from Mediterranean cork oak forestry. Using these materials locks in atmospheric carbon for the life of the building component and also helps to secure the biodiverse landscapes from which the cork is harvested.

Research questions included five key considerations: First, how might a new form of construction developed from environmental sustainability first principles manifest itself? Secondly, how much material and constructional complexity can be stripped out of a form of construction while still meeting building codes? Can solid expanded cork be used to form a weathertight structural building envelope? Can cork blocks be used in a viable dry-jointed form of construction with easy assembly, and simple disassembly at the building’s end of life? And finally, what might be the whole life performance of such a simple form of solid cork construction?

The research was undertaken over five years from 2014 to 2019, in three incremental stages with related methodologies and resources. Stage one began in 2014 with curiosity about building with solid expanded cork and the possible benefits. Initial design ideas and hypotheses progressed to simple prototypes, 2014. Stage two was the development of the Cork Construction Kit, beginning in 2015. The work was part funded with an Innovation Voucher from Innovate UK and showed promise while also indicating the scale of the challenge ahead.

Stage two was the development of the Cork Construction Kit, beginning in 2015. This was in-depth research, part funded by Innovate UK and EPSRC under the 2015 Whole Life Building Performance competition. It was undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team from industry and academia: MPH Architects, the Bartlett School of Architecture UCL, Arup, University of Bath, Amorim and Ty Mawr. The key aim was to research and develop a radically simple solid cork and timber construction kit. The design hypothesis for the system considered the relationship between material, components and resultant architectural forms. Technical performance was developed using cycles of ‘hypothesis, test, evaluate, rethink’ to address matters including structure, fire safety and weathertightness.

Preliminary cork blocks were fabricated with traditional timber machine tools. As the system was developed block geometries became more complex in order to fulfill the various performance requirements being asked of them – the price to pay for keeping the overall system simple. This, combined
with the tight machining tolerances needed to give a satisfactory interference fit between blocks, led to the development of a tailored robotic milling method to shape the blocks at the Bartlett. Research then proceeded in two main areas. Cork Cabin, a small prototype building, was built by hand in 2018, using dry-jointed blocks with an interlocking interference fit without glue or mortar. The cabin proved relatively simple to assemble by hand, with a full-size block measuring 960mm by 480mm by 180mm and weighing around 13kg. On completion it was tested for airtightness and field tested through the seasons. The other main area of work at this stage was lab testing at University of Bath, for structure and general material characterisation, and BRE Watford, for fire and weather-tightness. This informed further system development, and in 2018 the system was sufficiently developed and de-risked to proceed with the first pilot project.

Stage three was the construction of Cork House, designed by the authors and Dido Milne with structure and fire engineering by Arup, and built by Matthew Barnett Howland acting as main contractor. Work began concurrent to Stage 2 and was completed in 2019. Cork House is the first building of its type and fully meets UK Building Regulations. It uses an evolved version of the construction kit developed in Stage 2, is supported on steel screw pile foundations and built on a raised CLT floor platform. The 1268 cork blocks used in the house were fabricated on a 5-axis CNC milling machine by Wup Doodle and hand assembled on site. The house was air pressure tested and has been complete for nearly a year, proving a delight to inhabit.

Key outcomes of the research include the development of the Cork Construction Kit and the creation of Cork House. Simple assembly and disassembly have been demonstrated. Underlying this, extensive lab testing gives a fuller technical characterisation of expanded cork in construction. The house has exceptionally low whole life carbon, estimated at 618kg CO₂/m² by an assessment to BS EN 15978 undertaken by Sturgis Carbon Profiling. Embodied carbon at practical completion is estimated as negative, at -18kg CO₂/m². The research has a simple overarching narrative that is easily understood and may be enjoyed by anybody, giving it relatively broad interest and relevance. Cork House has received several design awards including the 2019 Stephen Lawrence Prize, and reached the 2019 RIBA Stirling Prize shortlist, which helped bring aspects of the research to an international audience.

What next? Post occupancy evaluation of the house has begun, with funding from the Bartlett, and the authors plan further research and development of the Cork Construction Kit, potentially to making the system commercially available. We are also undertaking broader research of simple, low carbon forms of construction, informed by sustainability considerations at each stage of the building’s life. We call this approach Form Follows Lifecycle.«

Oliver Wilton of University College London and Matthew Barnett Howland, CSK Architects.

Cork Construction Kit was category winner of the RIBA President’s Awards for Research: Design and technical.
Is the best hospital ward one with short routes between key areas or one that encourages professional communication?

Rosica Pachilova and Kerstin Sailer

Hospital planners and architects with the difficult task of designing a hospital ward can choose from a variety of types including radial, race-track and straight or L-shaped corridor layouts. But which is best? Previous research has suggested it is to minimise walking distances between functional areas, for example patient beds and nursing stations, to increase the time healthcare workers spend at patients' bedside. From this it can be inferred which areas of the inpatient ward should be placed in close proximity. Such measurements have been applied to different ward typologies to define the most efficient – assuming this would be the best performing. However, studies showed disparate results, often favouring one ward typology over another. Beyond walking efficiencies, earlier research suggested that the spatial configuration of hospital wards influenced face-to-face communication among healthcare workers. Studies showed that larger viewsheds provided good awareness of the ward environment and thus led to more communication opportunities and helped designers to develop spaces for communication and optimise designs for good care quality. In a first stage of the research, detailed movement and communication patterns of healthcare workers in six NHS wards was collected to define frequencies of travel between key areas. On this basis, the SCI index was developed and tested on floor plans of 31 NHS hospital wards – selected based on their quality of care rating by the Care Quality Commission. A representative sample of hospitals were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 'outstanding' through 'good' and 'requires improvement' to 'inadequate' was chosen. This particular data was selected because of the diversity of factors these hospitals monitor, including patient and staff movement. Each ward was analysed with Space Syntax methods, particularly using visibility graphs generated in Depthmap X software. By analysing spatial layouts with this method, one can quantify the size of viewsheds from a series of vantage points resulting in a metric called 'connectivity'. To develop SCI, we identified the most frequently traversed links between key areas in the six studied wards which were: patient bed to medication room (17%) and nursing station to medication room (6%). We then constructed shortest paths linking each one of these key areas and calculated the size of viewsheds en route. It was considered that by walking from one functional space to another, a healthcare worker 'accumulates' levels of connectivity. Observational data from the six wards showed that the higher the accumulated connectivity along a path, the more conversations a healthcare worker had. The average connectivity of the four major paths was then calculated and multiplied with the frequency of usage of each path. Finally, dividing this by the number of patient beds to account for ward unit size produced the SCI.

The index was calculated for all 31 NHS wards and the figures were related to care quality ratings using statistical analysis. We also tested whether the Yale Traffic Index, which did not, can be used to establish which wards provided better healthcare quality and that the higher the index, the better the quality of care rating was. In terms of design, these results highlight the importance of open spaces that healthcare workers traverse to get from one key area to another. This study contributed to the development of an objective method that can be used to benchmark design options of nursing wards. Indecisive between different layouts, the SCI index allows for a systematic comparison of hospital wards traversing key areas or one that encourages professional communication? The index was calculated for all 31 NHS wards and the figures were related to care quality ratings using statistical analysis. We also tested whether the Yale Traffic Index, which did not, can be used to establish which wards provided better healthcare quality and that the higher the index, the better the quality of care rating was. In terms of design, these results highlight the importance of open spaces that healthcare workers traverse to get from one key area to another. This study contributed to the development of an objective method that can be used to benchmark design options of nursing wards. Indecisive between different layouts, the SCI index allows for a systematic comparison of hospital wards traversing key areas or one that encourages professional communication?
How the Dayton peace accord, foreign funds and real-estate development fuel environmental damage

Mirna Pedalo

This project was conceived as a response to the rapidly changing (sub)urban and architectural landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Change was instigated by the surge in foreign real-estate investment after the 1990s war. The research focuses on the influx of money from the Gulf States directed into residential developments, tourist resorts and commercial buildings. But primarily it scrutinises the Dayton Peace Agreement in its role as a state-building mechanism; a distinct and crucial element that sets the change here apart from its global counterparts.

Throughout this research I have tried to demonstrate how the framework of the Dayton agreement has emerged as an instrument of finance and become the key architect of the new Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of my main aims was to uncover the ways in which the structural violence inherent to the Agreement, navigated by the force of capital and mediated through urban development, has gradually started to affect the natural environment by instigating a process of ‘slow violence’. This concept, developed by Rob Nixon, Rachel Carson professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, describes the gradual and often unseen effects of climate change and other manmade disasters such as large scale deforestations, oil spills and the environmental aftermath of armed conflict. Further, I investigated how this new milieu has encouraged the influx of foreign capital, resulting in new architectural and urban templates in the country.

Due to the project’s complexity and the need to continuously shift between global and local scales, while also taking into account the west Balkan region, I have used various methodologies to obtain material to formulate my arguments. Historical research was essential to fully grasp the legacy I was working with, and to scrutinise the current phenomenon in a global context, particularly in relation to the origins and history of circulation of the oil capital. The local scale was addressed by probing transformations in the urban and sub-urban environment of Sarajevo canton. The key element of study has been the analysis of past, existing and newly amended plans, regulations, policies and legislations, primarily in urban planning. This approach was reinforced by observing the correlation between planning documents and actual built environment elements encountered on the ground almost 10 years into the real estate boom.

Ethnographic research in the form of
Fieldwork eventually emerged as one of my key methodologies. Since very little prior research has been done into post-war architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, data had to be gathered on the ground through interviews with professionals in related fields and by visiting the development sites. Map-making became a main method of analysis, and then synthesis of the obtained data, aiming to articulate the relationship between the existing, the envisaged and that which is in the process of becoming. Although a growing network of new tourist resorts and developments has been in the process of permeating and weaving itself into the urban and suburban fabric of the capital for almost a decade now, there had been no comprehensive map that gave an overview of its scope, nor an insight into its relationship with existing urban and architectural formations. The information related to these newly built developments, as well as those in planning or under construction, is dispersed and usually limited to the affiliated real-estate agencies and/or local authorities. Therefore, creating a map that would assemble and visualise the relevant information relating to this emerging built fabric became one of the key aspects of my practice. Producing the maps was a layered process, resulting in visualisation of data gathered through ethnographic research (fieldwork and interviews) combined with information found in current and previous planning documents. This was further supplemented with maps that were retrieved when sourcing information, which offer a historical cross-section through the process of change. Such an approach has helped establish a direct correlation between real estate development, Dayton-instituted governmental bodies and the proliferation of slow violence. The shift in priorities that have been driving the decision-making process in urban planning and development has been significantly influenced by the influx of foreign investment. The process of map-making helped pinpoint the ways in which mechanisms generated through the framework of the Dayton Peace Agreement facilitate real-estate development, thus directly affecting the natural and social environment.

Delineating the Contested Landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Post-War Urban Development, by Mirna Pedalo of Goldsmiths, University of London, was category winner of the RIBA President’s Awards for Research: Cities and Community.

Creating a map of relevant information relating to this emerging built fabric became a key aspect of my practice.
Faience from Boston Valley Terra Cotta is bringing texture and colour to restorations and newbuilds on London’s streets.

Boston Valley Terra Cotta is a leading manufacturer of custom faience for historic restorations and high performance building envelopes in the US and the UK. Building professionals choose terra cotta for its durability and flexibility: it is an elastic medium that can express itself in a variety of shapes and surface treatments.

Buildings featuring Boston Valley Terra Cotta demonstrate the medium’s potential for transformation. Boston Valley works diligently to realise the client’s vision, providing custom architectural terra cotta in London for the Rathbone and Newman Passages, Battersea Power Station, and Lincoln Square – 48 Carey, 30 Broadwick, 60 Curzon, and Quadrant 4.

Rathbone and Newman Passages
Make Architects designed One Rathbone Square and the terra cotta passageways that connect Rathbone Place and Newman Street for pedestrians. Developed with Szerelmey, the curved TerraClad® rainscreen was created using extrusion and hand press forming methods. Arches were assembled in a full-scale mockup to ensure proper alignment and continuity. The terra cotta panels for this project draw in viewers with the curved design and alluring green glaze.

Battersea Power Station
Boston Valley is producing faience with Szerelmey for the historic redevelopment of the Battersea Power Station, one of the largest construction projects under way in Europe today. Boston Valley has been working with Wilkinson Eyre and Szerelmey to fabricate new masonry blocks to match the original surface treatment of the building. Masonry is fabricated using the extrusion and RAM press forming methods and finished with a speckled blue glaze.

30 Broadwick
Another project with Szerelmey, 30 Broadwick is a new building designed by Emrys Architects, featuring Boston Valley Terra Cotta masonry. Its location in the heart of Soho inspired its multifaceted facade of brick, stonework and faience. The variety of shapes in the angled facade were created using all four forming methods: RAM press, hand press, extrusion, and slip casting.

Usus for 30 Broadwick are finished with a dark, semi-metalllic satin glaze to achieve its signature ‘petrol black’ look.

Quadrant 4
Led by architect Allford Hall Monaghan Morris with Paye Stonework & Restoration as installation contractor, Quadrant 4 is a restoration of a 1930s Art Deco Hotel with a newly constructed addition. Boston Valley produced extruded terra cotta masonry with a pink-toned glass application and pulsachrome satin finish.

48 Carey, Lincoln Square
Designed by PLP Architects with Szerelmey as installation contractor, Lincoln Square is a new building featuring terra cotta masonry in a soft, speckled glaze. Extruded and hand pressed forms compliment the stonework on the rest of the building.

60 Curzon
Now under construction, the residential development at 60 Curzon in Mayfair, London, was also designed by PLP. The building features extruded rainscreen panels with a custom, deep green glaze developed by artist Christine Jetten and installed by Grants.

Boston Valley Terra Cotta is featured in the Hand Held to Super Scale: Building with Ceramics exhibition at the Building Centre. Additionally, Boston Valley collaborators will speak about the ACAWorkshop at the Building Centre on 30 January as a part of the Building with Ceramics series. Contact sales@bostonvalley.com.

Jade green rainscreen panels wrap across the arch for the entire length of the Rathbone and Newman Passages, enveloping those passing through the tunnels.

www.BostonValley.com
Overseas jobs soothe volatility

Exports of UK architectural expertise continue to rise, but construction as a whole is buying in more services than ever, according to a new study by RIBA and the ONS.

The latest official figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show UK exports of architectural services leapt to new heights in 2018. In cash terms they hit £773 million – a rise of £1 million on the 2017 figure.

According to records in the ONS’ Pink Book released at the end of October, architectural activities now contribute more than £400 million to the UK balance of payments.

The rise and rise of exports by UK architectural firms, plotted in Chart 1, dates back to just before the recession, now over a decade ago.

In the years to 2005 the level of exports was running at around £100 million a year. By 2007 that had increased beyond £300 million.

They remained high through the recession, supporting a sector that took a heavy knock as UK workloads dropped sharply. From 2008 to 2010 when its output was falling, the share of total work from overseas rose from below 10% to above 15% as work increased, helping to cushion the blow.

Chart 2. Using figures taken from ONS Annual Business Survey estimates of the gross value added by architectural activities and export data from the Pink Book 2019, it illustrates how exports have helped to dampen the effects of volatility in activity.

It shows that as work in the UK picked up in 2011 the share of overseas work fell, dipping below 10% again in 2013, although it remained fairly level in nominal terms.

But with workloads looking increasingly shaky in the home market since 2016, UK architects (mainly the larger firms) have sensibly once again turned their eyes to overseas markets. The share of overseas work, on these figures, has returned to above 12% and is helping to maintain the momentum of growth within the sector.

The figures may not be perfect, but they show how overseas markets are being seen more clearly as a means of smoothing workloads across softer periods in the UK market and of maintaining more stable growth.

The effect of having an established overseas market to turn to can be seen in the figures for both jobs and prices. Employment has held firm and prices have held firmer.

The jobs data shows continued strength in employment for architects and Chart 3 shows the ONS producer prices for architectural activities. The data suggest that prices were under pressure and have been firmer up more recently, coinciding with the rise in exports.

With the RIBA Future Trends survey for September showing workload expectations pointing to little or no growth, there is plenty to justify a further push into overseas markets (Chart 4). Furthermore, it strengthens the case given for the UK architecture sector having a strong export base.

That argument is even more pertinent today given the massive global pipeline of work expected over the next decade or two and the lack of professional skills to service a potential surge in activity for those working in the built environment, architects among them.

The UK, with its existing infrastructure and institutions, provides an obvious solid base on which to build an expanding global architectural infrastructure.

However, the export successes of architects come against a (rather surprising) £1.5 billion drop in the balance of payments for the wider architectural, engineering and other technical services sector. This is the result of a rapid rise in imports of engineering services over the past three years.

In the 10 years before 2016, imports had hovered around £1 billion. In 2016 they rose to £1.6 billion, in 2017 to 2.5 billion and in 2018 they hit £3.1 billion. The finer detail revealed in the trade figures by country and type of work throws up France and, intriguingly, Brazil as two of the nations that have sharply increased their imports of engineering services into the UK. The US, Germany and the Gulf states have also seen a rise in 2017 and 2018 over the 2016 figure.

How much the imported work is down to the nature of specific projects or associated relationships is unclear. But the timing of this sharp rise inevitably pumps up concerns over the potential impact of Brexit on attracting skills to the UK.

The engineering sector is struggling to attract talent as it is, with policy makers and industry jointly pushing the case for greater attention on STEM subjects at schools and universities.

But Brexit has added a further worry that it might dim the attractiveness of the UK and stem the flow of global talent into the nation’s consultancies.

There are corporate fears too that were expressed in the 2017 Association for Consultancy and Engineering report The Effect of EU Migration on the UK Consultancy and Engineering sector Post-Brexit. It warned that 22% of large consultancy firms will consider moving jobs out of the UK if it becomes more difficult to move staff around Europe.

In a digital age and with overseas engineering and design work increasingly in the hands of multi-national firms, the location of staff can be extremely flexible across the globe. This greater flexibility is a major reason why UK architecture has managed to be successful in exporting in recent years. The UK is regarded as attractive to architects.

While the details that lie behind the rise in imports of engineering services requires careful assessment, the fact that there has been an abrupt shift in fortune does act as a warning that continued progress in export markets is not a given.

And, on the subject of warnings, since the last sharp rise in overseas work anticipated a recession in the UK market, does the current sharp rise signal something similar?

If it does, the healthy level of exports will provide significant padding to ease the pain of any fall in UK workloads.

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Hugh Pearman had a dream... then reality intervened

What should the world of architecture be like in 2020? I had the strangest dream of a better world and when I awoke I found a scrawled list in my handwriting by my bed. It read:

*Return to the halcyon days of a common denominator, bargain-basement, built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, bargain-basement fashion. Better buildings cost that much more – to design as well as construct. You have to put in the hours, which need to be properly paid – and not around midnight.

Hugh Pearman Editor

It is clear that we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion.

But it is also clear we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion. It is clear that we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion. It is clear that we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion. It is clear that we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion.

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It is clear that we can’t make a better built environment for everyone in a lowest-common-denominator, bargain-basement, dog-eat-dog fashion.
Age should not wither

We have a tradition of preservation but how early should it start?

Will Wiles

2020 marks the centenary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, which granted American women the vote. To mark this anniversary, a special $1 coin will be minted. Signing the bill that ordered this coin, President Donald Trump wondered aloud ‘why wasn’t it done a long time ago,’ before concluding with characteristic modesty, ‘well, I guess the answer to that is because now I’m President, and we get things done.’

Of course no president, however stable their genius, can rush a centennial. These things take their time. But perhaps today they take a little less time than they used to. In 1957, the 100th anniversary of the accession to the throne of Queen Victoria was marked by the foundation of the Georgian Group, dedicated to preserving what remained of the buildings made before the Queen’s time. The buildings made during her reign did not have to wait quite so long to have a society dedicated to them: The Victorian Society was founded in 1976. And in 1992, the 100th anniversary of the accession to the throne of Queen Elizabeth II was marked by the foundation of the Twentieth Century Society, which granted American women the vote. To mark this anniversary, a special $1 coin will be minted. Signing the bill that ordered this coin, President Donald Trump wondered aloud ‘why wasn’t it done a long time ago,’ before concluding with characteristic modesty, ‘well, I guess the answer to that is because now I’m President, and we get things done.’

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In early October 2019, within an hour of chairing my first RIBA Council meeting, I asked for a vote on the preparedness of chartered and future architects as individuals and practices to take “the high road” of greater evidencing of competency, managing potential higher levels of risk, accepting greater responsibility and increasing expertise on route to potentially greater value, higher fees and positive impact – knowing that to do so will have major implications for the education of future architects and the continuing professional development of chartered architects and how they practise. Everyone, including student and international representatives, voted to take ‘the high road’. Our world and society have been irrevocably changed by the twin disasters of the climate emergency and the Grenfell fire and more environmental, social and financial disasters are looming, including housing need, increasing urbanisation, spatial and environmental inequality and declining wellbeing. The recent RIBA mission recommendations began to define and progress architects’ excellence – please let me know by 31 March via president@riba.org.

In 2020, there will be a major update of our best practice guidance. This will be a key component of the new Professional Indemnity Insurance to reflect the evolving situation in the insurance market, setting up to two-fold premium rises and increasingly broad exclusions in relation to doubling and fire safety claims. Additional best practice guidance recommends that members tightly consider and choose their Professional Indemnity (PI) insurance policy. The RIBA has issued an update to Practice Note 1: Professional Indemnity Insurance to reflect the evolving situation in the insurance market, setting up to two-fold premium rises and increasingly broad exclusions in relation to doubling and fire safety claims. Additional best practice guidance recommends that members tightly consider and choose their Professional Indemnity (PI) insurance policy.

I recently received a letter from one of our members saying, ‘I regard the RIBA as my career backbone and using a core set of skills and attributes. Should anything be added or taken away? Is there a better diagram? Together we can define and progress architects’ excellence – please let me know by 31 March via president@riba.org.’

Alain Jones
President

Holly Exley
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By Phil, a new customer and haven’t had a claim in the last 5 years.
Carbon crusaders

Steve Webb is the design engineer behind that most accessible of carbon measures, Range Rover Shopping Trips. His article equating the carbon cost of steel shelves or brick facades to supermarket runs in a gas-guzzling vehicle (RIBAJ October p38) made clear the huge responsibility of construction professionals and was one of 2019’s best read articles on ribaj.com. His practice now wants to make sustainability consultants part of the design team as carbon guardians.

For the last 15 years Webb Yates, which Webb co-founded, has been working with some of the best UK practices. You know that amazing stone load bearing facade by Amin Taha in Clerkenwell? That was one of theirs (see overleaf). They worked on the jigsaw of ply stairs that opened up a Victorian house for Marie’s Wardrobe, by Tsuruta Architects, and the 8m cantilever that defines the Virginia Water Pavilion working with Stanton Williams. BPN’s stark black and while Ghost House in Warwickshire and Selgas Cano’s cool and curvy Second Home coworking space in Spitalfields – they both show the deft hand of Webb Yates. A questioning and re-questioning of materials and their abilities seems to be at the heart of how Webb Yates operates. How else could they have come up with that gravity defying spiral stone Formby Stair invisibly tensioned with steel cables?

It is not the sort of work one might expect from an engineer whose career started with 12 hour shifts as a tunnelling and site engineer on London’s Jubilee Line Extension. Everything was dirty, people were grubby with missing fingers and twisted

Innovative engineer Webb Yates is on a mission to embed sustainability guardians in the design team

Words: Eleanor Young  Portrait: Ivan Jones
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Left: The remarkable self-supporting stone facade at Groupwork + Amin Taha’s 15 Clerkenwell Close, as engineered by Webb Yates.

Below: The corrugations of the brick facade of the five-storey extension on York House near King’s Cross with MP42's ability terms. But there are only so many things we can fight for. The timber structure was almost scrapped 20 times, Webb reports. “We had taken time setting out the sequencing so there was no rational reason, but there are different lead-ins on material and timber is longer, and contractors have established procurement routes and people they trust.”

It is easier when the client wants the same thing, Webb did a presentation to potential client Bywater Properties. ‘We talked about ourselves, stone and timber and they asked for a timber building.’ The agent was unexpectedly enthusiastic. Webb adopts the role: ‘Oh yah, sustainability, I can sell that like hot cakes.’ So he and Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios have a £25m timber structure building, Old Paradise Street, just submitted for planning. A project discussion can easily spin out into wider questions such as Legal and General’s CLT factory, ways of using the UK’s rather weedy sitka spruce, the incredibly hard beech glulam BauBuche (which Webb Yates paired with 90mm concrete slabs on the Anna Freud Centre in north London for carbon sequestration, coolth and strength) and whether too much commercial forestry would be bad for the environment.

From 2015 to 2017 Webb Yates had a big growth spurt, opening offices in Bristol, Birmingham and Dubai. It almost doubled

Oh yah, sustainability, I can sell that like hot cakes

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The RIBA Journal January 2020
its staff within one year as it set up two new teams, in services with ex-Arup Andy Lerpinier and in architecture (as Interrobang) with Maria Smith, ex Studio Weave and onetime RIBA Journal columnist. In the intervening years Smith took an engineering degree and now has a team of four architects. ‘They break up engineering culture,’ says Webb happily. But the growth was not matched by workflow so the Dubai office has closed, and voluntary redundancies have seen staff numbers shrink to a more sustainable 70. In the office a meeting room wall is lined with beer bottles, not a testament to hard drinking but to the annual creative competition of team brewing and branding.

Smith styles the practice as ‘transdisciplinary’ and suggests how it might go beyond the norm by offering carbon and energy guardians who can ensure nuanced, informed decisions – particularly about embodied carbon at the time they will make the most difference to a project. As Webb has been pushing timber and stone so Smith has been researching for her curation of the Oslo Biennale, active with Architects Declare and elected to RIBA Council on the promise to address climate change.

Since the IPCC report there seems to be a sea change in attitudes in construction, with major developments committing to publishing their paths to zero carbon, the London Plan requesting embodied carbon information for referable schemes and the RIBA setting its 2030 Challenge to support practices in making more sustainable projects. ‘As engineers we work out rough carbon calculations,’ says Webb. ‘But it needs time and knowledge.’ The resources are growing but things like the Bath Inventory of Carbon and Energy database or Hawkins/Brown’s emissions reduction tool are still blunt instruments. Webb Yates hopes that carbon guardians will operate alongside a project in the way cost consultants or CDM coordinators do, so the most important decisions can be made at the right time. Will it work as a business? It is hard to say but there are manifest opportunities to bring more evidence, rigour and fundamental questioning to early stage design decisions and how they are implemented. This is a team who are not afraid to point out the madness of crushing, heating and reconstituting limestone to make a weaker material, concrete.

Below: Renovation of the art deco Hoover Building by Webb Yates was as structure and service engineers and as architects. The embodied carbon of the work was 355kg CO2/m², much of that spent on secondary glazing. 

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- Daylighting and the impacts on health, wellbeing and performance
- Insulation solutions to meet thermal comfort and daylighting requirements within an education building

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Edward Horder Cullinan 1931 – 2019

RIBA Royal Gold Medal winner famed for the Olivetti offices and Fountains Abbey visitor centre among others; teacher, collaborator and known above all for his inclusive, optimistic approach

Two of the eulogies at Ted Cullinan’s life celebration at the RIBA in late November were particularly telling. The first was from Georgia Garrett, daughter of clients for whom Ted built a house in the suburban south London fringe in 1970. The family became friends with the Cullinans who had children of similar age. She described herself as a timid child in Ted’s company – especially on his famously brazen smallholding up in the Peak District, Gib Tarn, where stuff always needed fixing up - her timidity fell away and she found herself mending barn roofs, dangling off ropes and diving headfirst into icy ponds.

The second came from one of the many architects who worked with Ted over the years before setting up their own practices. In a way it was similar. Sasha Bhavan told how, as a mixed-race child, she had experienced prejudice and been misunderstood at school, and became withdrawn. The second came from one of the many architects who worked with Ted over the years before setting up their own practices. In a way it was similar. Sasha Bhavan told how, as a mixed-race child, she had experienced prejudice and been misunderstood at school, and became withdrawn. She studied architecture and then joined the Cullinan practice. There, she said, Ted saw only talent and the possibilities of people. Given full confidence and responsibility, she blossomed, staying 10 years and rising to director.

A significant early series of commissions was for regional centres for Olivetti: working with colleagues including Jolyan Wickham he developed an adaptable courtyard plan with prefabricated plywood superstructure. All still exist in other uses. The courtyard plan recurs in his work, as at his 2013 Maggie’s Centre in Newcastle. An extension wing to this will be his last personally designed project.

His flair for flexibility is demonstrated by another listed building – the RMC International headquarters in Surrey (1985-90). Its low-lying bulk hidden beneath an enormous formal roof garden, which is now being adapted and extended as a retirement home. One of his most successful buildings, the Fountains Abbey/Studley Royal Visitor Centre of 1987-92, used traditional timber, dry-stone walling and leadwork in new configurations. Fountains, conceived as part of an overall landscape plan for the site, shows what we lost when his 1993 competition-winning design for a new Stonehenge visitor centre was abandoned. In 2008 he won the RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture. Although he was not one for icon-making, his buildings could be defiantly strange, such as his Centre for Mathematical Sciences at Cambridge University (1996-2002) with its shallow-arched grassed roof and its curious pagoda-like ventilation turrets. Or from the same period his utterly different Downland Gridshell at the Weald and Downland Open-air museum in Sussex – shortlisted for the Stirling Prize – where he experimentated fruitfully with the curvilinear form of a building made of a lattice-work of loosely-interwoven wooden poles.

A romantic and an optimist, his socially progressive, collaborative, congenial and sustainable architecture has come back into focus as urgently appropriate for our times. All still exist in other uses. The courtyard plan recurs in his work, as at his 2013 Maggie’s Centre in Newcastle. An extension wing to this will be his last personally designed project.

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Pallant House
Chichester, around 1712

Pallant House in Chichester, photographed here by Edwin Smith in 1958, was built around 1712 for merchant Henry Peckham. Designed by a London architect, the building was admired as the first example of the fashionable Queen Anne style in the city. After a period during the 20th century as council offices, the house was restored when the Dean of Chichester Cathedral gave his collection of modern British art to the city with the condition that it be displayed in Pallant House. It opened as a gallery in 1982. The collection grew, and when the architect Colin St John Wilson offered his own art collection to the gallery in the 1990s, the need for more space was clear. Consent for a new gallery was eventually granted and in 2006 a wing by Long and Kentish, with Wilson, opened. The modern extension exists in considerate contrast to the historic building, the new galleries carefully scaled to relate to the early 18th century rooms. Sustainability was a key concern and the building was the first gallery in Britain to use geothermal heating and cooling. It seems appropriate that Pallant House should continue to be cutting-edge 300 years after it was built. •

Justine Simcock